

**Impacts of Choice and Unstructured Writing on Middle School Students' Writing
Self Perception and Motivation**

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Abstract

School systems in the United States are emphasizing a focus on standards and standardized testing. With this focus, time for writing in the classroom is lost. Students are also coming into the classroom with a negative attitude towards writing, and a negative view of themselves as writers. This study focuses specifically on middle school students, and how the infusion of choice and unstructured writing time impacts both their motivation and how they view themselves as writers. Seventh grade students were given two weeks to create a writing project of their choice, of any genre and any topic. This study found that time for unstructured writing allowed students more freedom and choice, which led to many positive experiences with writing and deep engagement with their writing projects. Students also experienced a positive writing community and showed positive growth in how they understand others perceive them as writers, as well as positive growth in their own response towards writing.

Keywords: Choice, creativity, writing, student self-perception, engagement, community

Introduction

I have taught middle school language arts for four years. As a language arts teacher, two of my primary goals are to create an enjoyment of writing in my students and for my students to see themselves as writers. However, writing is a challenging subject to teach because there is not one correct approach. Writing can vary so greatly from one genre to another and even from one student to another. Writing is a personal expression and will therefore be a unique experience and process for every individual. This is part of what makes writing such a powerful tool, but also a complex subject to teach well. Creating an enjoyment of writing can also be challenging, as students sometimes view writing as something they have to do a certain way for a grade, rather than a way they can create and explore their understanding and ideas.

For two years, I had the opportunity to teach a seventh and eighth grade creative writing elective. Creative writing was a class where I aimed to make writing fun, expose students to as many types of writing as possible, and give students time to create and write. We alternated between individual writing projects and group writing projects, and student input often led where we went next. As the class progressed, I began to notice that my creative writing students were performing better in my regular language arts class. They were more confident in their writing and their identity as writers, and both their writing quality and attitudes toward writing reflected this. I was particularly struck by this growth I saw in several of my reluctant writers, who ended up in creative writing only because it sounded slightly better than band class, not because they enjoyed writing.

One example was Abby*, a seventh grade student in my creative writing class. At the start of the school year, Abby had a strong aversion to all writing. It was something that presented many difficulties for her, and her writing in language arts was frequently short, incomplete sentences, with as few words as possible. In creative writing, Abby's reluctance continued, but she tried to write when required. Eventually, she began to write fictional short

**All student names are pseudonyms.*

stories, and began to enjoy writing these short stories. She discovered she had a strong knack for creating characters and dialogue, and started to write more stories on her own time at home. As this progressed, Abby's writing in language arts became more detailed and more complete thoughts, and she no longer complained each time they were told the assignment would require writing. Abby was not the only reluctant writer in creative writing class and this progress was mirrored in several other students as well. They began to see writing as something that was accessible and even enjoyable in creative writing, and this transferred to growth in their writing across the board.

I began to wonder how I could implement this kind of writing growth into my regular language arts classes. Unfortunately, it is not reasonable to drop everything else and only write in language arts like we do in creative writing due to other skills and requirements that need classroom time, such as reading. However, I believed there must be some elements of the creative writing experience that I could use. In this research, I set out to find ways I could infuse elements of creative writing class into the standard language arts classroom in order to create more confident and motivated writers. I decided to set aside a large chunk of time in my classroom instruction just for students to write with little to no structure on how or what to write, and see how students would respond and what they would do. I hoped that through this dedicated time for writing, students would be able to have a positive and meaningful experience with writing that would extend beyond their writing project and into all of their future writing.

Research Questions

The following two questions guided this research:

1. How do creative and unstructured writing opportunities impact students' perception of themselves as writers and their engagement with their writing?
2. How can peer and teacher feedback impact a classroom writing community?

Literature Review

The Problems with Teaching Writing

Consalvo and David (2024) label teaching writing as a “wicked problem”: one that is so complex, there is not one simple or straightforward solution. One aspect of this problem is that our school system in the United States has become dominated by teaching to standards and standardized tests. Due to low test scores, schools are focusing more on test preparation than meaningful writing and learning experiences (Higgins et al., 2006), yet according to Consalvo and David (2024) there is no evidence that teaching to the test makes students better writers. The focus has become the ability to rank and compare students, rather than focusing on teaching and preparing students well (Gallagher & Kittle, 2020). Standardized and test-based writing leads to a very limited definition of ‘good writing’ and has been shown to negatively impact students’ motivation to write (Consalvo & David, 2024).

Writing instructional time has been particularly impacted by this standardization of learning. Most standardized tests do not require lengthy written pieces, and time for writing instruction is lost when other tested subjects, such as reading comprehension or math, hold greater emphasis (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Donovan, 2016). Students are not writing frequently in the classroom, and they are not composing extended writing pieces (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Graham, et al., 2019). Writing more frequently enhances student learning and writing proficiency (Heller, 2015) and therefore needs to be happening consistently in the classroom.

Research indicates that not only are students writing less, but the ways in which writing is taught is often ineffective and leaves students unprepared for the needed independence for writing in college (Gallagher & Kittle, 2020). Schools emphasize a form-first and formulaic approach to teaching writing, with structures such as the five paragraph essay that oversimplify writing (Consalvo & David, 2024; Heller, 2015; Rowlands, 2016). These form-first writing

approaches may allow students to write quickly for standardized tests that involve essay questions, or even streamline the writing and grading process, yet this form-first approach leads writers to focus more on following form than creating meaningful content, and prevents students from actually learning how to write well (Rowlands, 2016). For the purposes of this study, I chose to focus on the opposite of this form-first and formulaic writing, which will be referred to as both “unstructured writing” and “creative writing” interchangeably.

Rowlands proposes instead that teaching writing should focus on purpose, audience, and context rather than form, stating that “writing formulas don’t work well precisely because the rhetorical situation ... changes with every writing task”(p. 54). Writing instruction has become “dominated by tasks in which the teacher does all the composing and students are left only to fill in the missing information” (Applebee & Langer, 2011, p. 26). Inadequate writing instruction also lacks emphasis on crucial practices such as editing and revising (Graham et al., 2019). Writing is a continual process, and students need to engage with writing drafts and learning to edit and revise their pieces.

Why Writing Matters

Research indicates that writing enhances both reading skills and students’ performance in other school subjects (Graham et al., 2019). As students improve their reading comprehension and writing skills, they will be better prepared to analyze a historical text, explain their findings in a lab report, and support their ideas with reasoning. Writing does not exist only in the English classroom, but rather is the foundation for all other subject areas to build upon, and therefore is a highly critical skill to develop.

Writing also can take many forms (Graham et al., 2019). It can be used to help students learn, to help assess what they have learned, and even to help them explore and develop their sense of identity (Eodice et al., 2025). In addition, according to Higgins et al. (2006), authentic

writing experiences help students to view themselves as writers, while also allowing them to bring in their own interests and backgrounds and explore their personal identities.

Even outside of the classroom, writing is everywhere. Whether or not students realize it, they are constantly consuming and composing as they go about their day: texting, posting online, watching videos, communicating with others, etc. (Eodice et al., 2025). By teaching writing, teachers begin to prepare their students for success in their classroom, but also for the world beyond it. “The goal of instruction is to produce lifelong learners, not test takers” (Higgins et al., 2006, p. 311).

Ranck-Buhr (2012) surveyed students across several grade levels to ask why they write. The younger elementary students answered that they write because it is fun. As students got older, they began to answer that they wrote either because they have something to say, or because it is a required assignment. However, there were also several middle school students who identified writing as a necessary creative outlet for themselves— a way they made sense of the world. Hedgecock and Hackney (2023) saw similar impacts of writing within their research. Writing was an opportunity for their students to consider themselves, and reflect on both who they are and the world around them. Writing is more than an important skill. It is a powerful and personal experience for students to make sense of the world around them and who they are, and it is an outlet for free expression, joy, and creativity.

Making Meaningful and Authentic Writing Through Choice and Creativity

Teaching writing is a complex problem, and research finds that many teachers lack confidence in both their knowledge of writing and their own writing (Dostal & Gabriel, 2015). As mentioned, Consalvo and David in their book *When Teaching Writing Gets TOUGH* (2024) describe the complexities of teaching writing, and how there is no one solution that will make this task easy, due to the variation of students that make up a classroom, and the fact that there is no single standard or formulaic way to write well. However, there are many strategies and

approaches that have been proven beneficial for teaching writing that teachers can utilize as they best see fit in their classrooms.

All of the following strategies aim to create meaningful and authentic writing experiences. Meaningful writing is not isolated to a classroom context; it clearly connects to student interests, experiences, or communities (Eodice et al, 2025), which can be achieved through allowing students to choose topics or genres to write about. Authentic writing is similar, as it draws on student experiences and knowledge, aiming to connect student writing with meaning beyond the classroom (Consalvo & David, 2024). By creating opportunities where students can choose where to go and what to do with their writing, students are allowed to bring in their authentic selves and write about things that interest them. Both choice and unstructured writing make room for students to perceive their writing as something that matters and something worth their time and effort. They move writing beyond just restating given information and provide students tools to question, explore, and grow. When students have creative writing experiences that are meaningful and authentic, they are more engaged in their writing and see themselves as writers.

Time to Write

Teaching writing requires intentional and regular time (Consalvo & David, 2024; Graham et al., 2019) both for direct instruction and for students to write. Heller (2015) argues that writing should be viewed as a process rather than a product, and this requires students to write more. Viewing writing as a process allows more value of thoughtful and reflective creation, instead of viewing writing as a simple product to turn in for a grade.

A Community of Writers

Writing is highly social (Eodice et al., 2025). Writers need to participate in various writing communities (Graham et al., 2019). This can be achieved through giving students tools and instructions on how to give substantial peer feedback and dialogue with each other about their writing (Kelly, 2015; Leekeenana & Warrington, 2024). When students have time to talk about their writing and collaborate with peer groups, they may begin to feel they are part of a writing

community and be challenged by peers to engage more in depth with their own writing. This community of writers can also be established through conferences with the teacher (Consalvo & David, 2024; Leekeenana & Warrington, 2024). Writing conferences do not need to be lengthy to be impactful, but students benefit from dialoguing with the teacher about their writing and seeing the teacher engage with them as a writer. It is also important for the teacher to offer timely feedback for students (Heller, 2015) both throughout the writing process and on final drafts, whether this is within a writing conference or through another avenue of feedback.

Writer Identity and Self Perception

Students need to see themselves as writers (Gallagher and Kittle, 2020). One way to help students develop their writing identity is through both goal setting and having students reflect on their own writing (Hartford, 2008). When students view themselves as writers, they are more likely to engage well and take ownership of their writing. Students seeing themselves as writers also can be used to help them explore, discover, and form their identity. Students all come from unique places and backgrounds, and writing should allow them to explore these stories. A study by Donovan (2015) showed that infusing place and open ended writing into the classroom not only helps students connect to their communities and deepen their understanding of their identity, but also improves student writing through showing more complexity in their thought, exceeding length expectations, and in some cases, even an improvement in mechanics. Their motivation for writing was higher because they were writing about things that mattered to them, and growing in their identity as writers and humans.

Teaching writing well also requires giving students the opportunity to write for real audiences, other than just writing for the teacher in order to receive a grade (Consalvo & David, 2024; Dostal & Gabriel, 2015). According to Dostal (2015), “There is always room to connect writing instruction to audiences and purposes that make writing worthwhile” (p. 14). When students are writing for real audiences, they become more invested in their writing, see real purpose behind their task, and even see how writing connects to the world around them outside

of the classroom. Connecting writing to a real audience is also a great way to connect students to their communities and places (Donovan, 2016).

Choice and Creativity

Student writing benefits from the infusion of choice and creativity. In my research, I refer to this infusion as both creative and unstructured writing—writing where the students are the leaders of what they do, rather than the teacher. Creating space for student choice in writing increases their engagement and intrinsic motivation, while also helping them develop their own voice (Gallagher & Kittle, 2020; Norris, 2015). Student choice can be integrated into allowing students to choose from a variety of prompts, choose their own topic, or even choosing the genre or format for their writing. Students will all have unique interests and strengths, and Norris (2015) argues that writing in the classroom should be a space where students can bring their passions. Having students write about topics they are passionate or knowledgeable about will also continue to develop their sense of autonomy and their writer identity. Allowing students to make decisions in their writing also helps them to become more independent (Kordtlandt, 2020) and to develop both their creativity and curiosity. Gallagher and Kittle (2020) argue that students need curiosity in their writing. Students also need exposure to a variety of genres and tasks, and choice allows them to explore the different types of writing that may interest them. Research also indicates that creative writing opportunities can be effective in changing students' attitudes and prejudices toward writing (Turkben & Karaca, 2023).

Read and Write Together

Effective writing instruction needs to be paired with reading (Kordtlandt, 2020). Writing is not an isolated task, and should be completed in tandem with various readings. Mentor texts are a key way for students to learn and observe strong writing moves to try in their own writing (Consalvo & David, 2024; Norris, 2015). Use of mentor texts to introduce different genres and writing also helps steer both teachers and students away from the prescriptive and formulaic writing that is so present in schools. Writing can also be done about class readings, to help with

comprehension, asking questions, and other skills. Eodice et al. (2025) writes, “Not all writing tasks need to be formal or high stakes or assessed with grades. Low-stakes, generative, experimental, creative, and often non-graded writing makes up the majority of writing we all do, in and out of school”(p. 91). Writing does not only have to be large, formal projects, but rather should be integrated into every moment of the classroom in a variety of forms.

Teach Writing

Writing requires explicit instruction (Consalvo & David, 2024; Graham et al., 2019). Particularly, students need instruction on different phases of the writing process, including planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing (Giouroukakis & Connolly, 2015). Students need to understand that planning is not a one time event in the writing process, but an on-going event that will adapt and change as they write (Higgins, 2006). They also benefit from instructions on writing multiple drafts, and the differences between editing and revising in order to make their piece stronger. Gallagher & Kittle (2020) emphasize that teachers should focus on writing experiences, rather than the specific writing assignment and outcome.

Methodology

For this research, practitioner inquiry, specifically teacher research, was utilized. I engaged in practitioner inquiry in the Spring of 2026, as I simultaneously took on the roles of teacher and researcher in my classroom, through selecting particular curricular moves and projects to implement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). This was my fourth year of teaching. All four years have been at the same school, with one year of experience teaching 5th grade before moving up to the middle school levels of 6th-8th grade. I chose to complete this research in my own classroom because I have always been passionate about student choice and creativity. I wanted to use the base I have established with my students to see how I could encourage more growth in how they engage with writing and see themselves as writers. I believe this research to be more impactful due to the relationships I had built with students before the study began.

My research was also shaped by constructivist learning theory, as I believe students construct their knowledge based on their own experiences and understandings (Feder, 2025). Every student will not learn the same way, and therefore students should be given the opportunity to exercise their autonomy in the classroom and be an active part of their learning, not just a passive receptor of information. This understanding is why I wanted to create a potentially joyful and positive writing experience for students to help them shape their view of writing and of themselves as writers. Sociocultural theory, developed primarily by Lev Vygotsky, also is a crucial building block of my research. Learning is social and students need to collaborate and work with other students and with a teacher in order to acquire new skills and understandings. Learning in the classroom is not isolated from the world around it, as students bring in their unique backgrounds and interests. These guiding principles led me to create a study that allowed for students to build upon their own interests and make decisions about what they want to create.

Classroom Context

This study took place within a rural, private Christian school in the mountain west of the United States. The school is over 120 years old and is situated within an agricultural community with deep family histories. The school population is a blend of students who live in the community and commute in from other areas. This study specifically took place within my 7th grade language arts classes, totaling 19 students. Of these 19 students, 9 are female and 10 are male. English is the primary language spoken for all students. 15 of 19 students had me as a teacher for their 6th grade language arts year as well.

I obtained assent from student subjects and consent from parents or guardians (IRB Protocol Number: 2026-2554). Students who opted not to partake in the study still participated in all classroom activities, but their responses and data were not included in the study.

Curricular Context

This study took place over the course of twelve 50-minute class periods. It was implemented at the end of quarter three, in the weeks leading up to Spring Break. Before this project, students had completed two short story units from the curriculum StudySync, one focused on the theme of conflict, and one focused on the themes of love and loss. Each of the units are made up of fictional short stories, non-fiction articles, reports, speeches, and excerpts from novels. The students analyze these works through short answer questions, reading quizzes, vocabulary work, and other interactive assignments. We also did a novel study of *The Outsiders* together as a class. The novel unit ended with a project on symbolism and theme, as well as an essay where the students compared themselves to a character in the novel. Throughout the year, we had also been working our way through the eight parts of speech through short workbook assignments 3-4 days a week. Students also began class either by writing in their journals which consisted of two days a week of free write and one day a week of a persuasive prompt, or by reading their independent reading books.

For the purpose of this study, classroom routines such as writing into the day and grammar warm ups were paused to allow more time for writing on their projects. The exception to this was the continuation of 10 minutes of independent reading time when starting class on Tuesdays and Thursdays, as well as a class read aloud for the last 20 minutes of class on Fridays. These reading times were kept in place in order to provide continuation of important classroom rhythms and routines.

Study Timeline:

- Day One: Initial survey and introduction of project
- Day Two: Writing time, mini lesson on outlining and planning, and initial individual student teacher conferences using student proposal forms
- Day Three- Six: Writing time, students work on creating their piece, frequent teacher check-ins with students

- Day Seven: Mini lesson on giving peer feedback, students who are ready to begin editing swap projects with peers
- Day Eight: Writing time continued, rough drafts due by end of class
- Day Nine- Ten: Edit and revise with feedback from Mrs. Brown and with at least 1-2 peers, individual student teacher conferences
- Day Eleven: Work on reflection paragraphs, complete post-survey, and time to finalize projects
- Day Twelve: Share projects with whole class

Study Details

On the first day, students were given an initial survey, utilizing the “Writer Self Perception Scale” created by Diane Bottomley, William A. Henk, and Steven A. Melnick (1997). From this created “Writer Self Perception Scale” I used the questions from three of their five categories: General Progress, Social Feedback, and Physiological States. I selected these categories to focus on how students view themselves as writers, including how they believe other people perceive them as writers, how writing makes them feel, and how they feel about their writing skills, with statements such as “Writing is easier for me than it used to be”, “My classmates would say I write well”, or “Writing makes me feel calm”. For each statement, the students selected their answer on a 5 point scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree.

After this survey, I introduced students to the writing “Passion Project”. I instructed students to create a polished piece of writing in a format of their choice over the next two weeks. They were given ideas of different formats they could use, such as a short story, poems, a movie script, researching a topic of their interest, etc. With the introduction of this project, we also discussed how the students would define creativity, and why they thought there was not a specific length requirement.

On this first day, I also gave students a proposal form to fill out, where they were to write:

1. Their chosen form or genre, 2. A brief summary of what they think their piece will be about,

and 3. One personal writing goal for this project. Some students completed these proposals in the first few minutes of having them as they knew exactly what they wanted to write about, while others needed more time and finished their proposal on day two. These proposal forms were used in individual conferences with myself and the students on day two and three as they began to flesh out their ideas and projects. Creating a personal writing goal was included as part of the proposal to encourage them to reflect on themselves as writers. As a class, we also discussed how and why to prewrite and plan writing, and spent time doing so.

Days three through eight of this study were mostly utilized for time to write their pieces. Some students chose to work on their piece outside of class time as well, although this was not required. Students were asked to submit a rough draft of their project to me by day eight, so that I could provide detailed feedback for them over the weekend between days eight and nine. This time of writing also included a mini lesson on both peer and self editing tools. For days nine, ten, and eleven, students had a self edit checklist to use, as well as a questionnaire to use for peer feedback and were encouraged to have at least two peers read their piece. Many students continued to work on their drafts throughout these days as well.

On day eleven, I asked students to complete a written reflection piece as well by the end of this time. The reflection questions were provided on day one with the project instructions.

Students were asked to answer the following questions:

- How do you feel this project went?
- What project did you choose and why did you choose it?
- How did working without strict structure affect your ideas and motivation?
- How did workshopping with a group of peers impact your writing?
- Which moments show your strongest writing voice?
- How will this project change your future writing habits?
- What is something from this project you are proud of?

On day eleven, students also took the “Writer’s Self-Perception Scale” survey for a second time.

For the final day of this project, students sat in a circle around the room and each shared part of their project. For the sake of time and due to the length of several of the pieces, students were asked to select a section of their project that was anywhere from half a page up to two pages in length to share.

Data and Results

Surveys

The “Writer’s Self Perception Scale” survey (See Appendix B) had 21 statements for students to agree or disagree with. Of these statements, eight were categorized as “General Progress” assessing how students believed their writing has progressed, seven as “Social Feedback” assessing how students perceive other people view them as writers, and five as “Physiological State” assessing how writing makes students feel. There was also one labeled “General”, with the statement “I think I am a good writer”.

To assess changes on these surveys, each answer was given a numerical value on a scale of 1-5, Strongly Disagree being one point, Disagree being two points, Undecided being three points, Agree being four points, and Strongly Agree being five points. The nature of the statements in this survey are designed so that agreeing with the statements reflects a more positive view of writing or themselves as a writer.

In the tables below, each student score on the post survey is provided. It is then compared to their original score on the initial survey. If their score saw positive growth, it is highlighted in green. If their score decreased from pre to post survey, it is highlighted in red. Student scores were also averaged to compare notable growth as a whole class. The coloring applies to both individual scores and class averages for each question.

Table one focuses on the “General Progress” questions. These questions provided students with statements such as “Writing is easier for me than it used to be” and “I am getting better at writing”. It is notable that many of the responses on the initial survey for this category started with a four or five response, leaving little room for growth. Therefore, much of the table that follows is white, indicating no change from pre to post survey.

Table 1:

Student responses on post-survey to general progress questions.

Question Category:	GPR	GPR	GPR	GPR	GPR	GPR	GPR	GPR
Question Number:	1	3	7	9	11	12	13	14
A	4	4	4	5	4	4	5	5
B	4	4	5	4	4	5	4	4
C	3	3	3	4	4	4	3	1
D	2	4	3	4	4	4	4	4
E	3	4	3	4	4	4	4	3
G	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	3
H	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
I	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
J	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
K	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
L	2	3	3	2	3	3	2	3
N	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3
O	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4
P	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5
Q	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4
R	4	4	4	3	3	3	4	4

S	4	4	5	4	4	4	5	3
Average	3.65	3.88	4.00	3.94	4.00	4.06	4.00	3.71
Pre-Survey Average	3.82	3.76	3.88	4.06	3.88	4.00	3.88	3.82
Difference	-0.18	0.12	0.12	-0.12	0.12	0.06	0.12	-0.12

Table One shows relatively little change from pre to post survey in the General Progress category, particularly in comparison to the other categories assessed. It is possible that the General Progress statements, such as “My writing is better than before” or “The organization of my writing has really improved” require a longer time frame than the two and a half weeks of this study to show growth. These statements also had the highest class averages, showing that this area was one that the students felt more confident in coming into the research.

Table Two shows student responses for all Social Feedback questions. These questions assessed how students believe other people perceive them as a writer with statements such as “My classmates would say I write well” and “People in my family think I am a good writer”.

Table 2:

Student responses on post surveys to social feedback questions.

Question Category:	SF	SF	SF	SF	SF	SF	SF
Question Number:	2	5	6	8	17	19	21
A	4	4	3	4	4	3	3
B	3	4	3	3	4	4	3
C	2	4	3	3	3	4	3
D	3	4	3	3	4	4	3

E	3	4	3	3	4	3	3
G	2	4	3	2	4	4	1
H	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
I	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
J	4	4	4	4	4	4	3
K	4	4	5	4	4	4	4
L	4	3	3	4	3	3	3
N	3	4	3	3	3	3	3
O	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
P	5	4	4	5	4	5	4
Q	3	5	3	3	5	5	3
R	3	4	4	3	4	4	4
S	3	4	4	3	4	4	4
Average	3.35	3.94	3.47	3.41	3.82	3.82	3.24
Pre-Survey Average	3.29	3.41	3.06	3.35	3.12	3.25	3.12
Difference	0.06	0.53	0.41	0.06	0.71	0.57	0.12

Note that all class averages for this category increased from pre to post survey, increasing anywhere from 0.06 points to 0.71. This indicates that this project had an overall positive impact on how students believe others view them as writers.

Table three includes the one General statement, “I think I am a good writer”, as well as the Physiological States questions, asking how writing makes students feel with statements such as “When I write, I feel calm”.

Table 3:

Student responses on post survey to general questions and physiological state questions.

Question Type:	GEN	PS	PS	PS	PS	PS
Question Number:	10	4	15	16	18	20
A	4	3	4	4	4	3
B	4	4	4	4	3	3.5
C	3	3.5	3	2	3	1
D	4	2	3	2	3	4
E	4	3	3	3	3	3
G	4	3	4	2	4	2
H	4	3	3	3	3	3
I	3	3	3	3	3	3
J	4	3	3	3	3	3
K	5	5	5	5	5	5
L	2	2	2	3	1	1
N	3	2	2	2	3	3
O	3	4	4	4	3	4
P	5	5	5	5	5	5
Q	3	3	3	3	3	2
R	3	4	3	3	3	3
S	4	2	2	3	2	2
Average	3.65	3.21	3.29	3.18	3.18	2.97
Pre-Survey Average	3.18	2.69	2.71	3.06	2.41	2.59
Difference	0.47	0.52	0.59	0.12	0.76	0.38

Note: Data from Students F and M were not included in these tables due to insufficient data collected on the post survey.

For the one General question, “I think I am a good writer”, the class average increased from a score of 3.18 to 3.65. For the Physiological State statements, the average class response saw a positive increase for all questions, increasing anywhere from 0.12 points up to 0.76 points. This indicates that this project had a positive impact on how students approach writing and see themselves as writers.

The statement with the largest margin of average growth was “Writing makes me feel good”, followed closely by “My teacher thinks I am a good writer”, with an average growth of 0.76 and 0.71 points respectively. The third statement with the most positive growth was “I am relaxed when I write”, with an average growth of 0.59 points.

Observations

Throughout this project, I was able to make many observations as the teacher in the classroom. Some of the key observations I made follow.

When this project was introduced to the students, I anticipated more students to be initially unsure of what they wanted to write about. However, the majority of students were quickly excited about a specific idea that they wanted to pursue. For students that were unsure, I asked them to be okay ‘sitting in’ their thoughts for a little and being okay not knowing what to write about right away, and then would have them read through their writer’s notebook to see if there were any excerpts in their writing from the year that stood out. Other students benefited from writing or discussing a list of ideas of any topics that they are interested in, and seeing if they could begin to form an idea from there. Some students gained ideas from talking with peers. Several of these students that were stuck at first expressed frustration with either not knowing how to start, or not knowing what to write about.

One discussion that stood out from introducing the project was around the topic of length. I posed the question to the students, asking why they thought there was no length requirement for this project. Length requirements are not usually present in this class, but it is a question that still comes up frequently. The student answers included identification of each

student having different writing abilities and the difficulty of comparing length across some genres (like poems versus a short story). Whenever a student asked how long their project needed to be, I told them it should be a length they were proud to create in the given two week time period. This answer was to hopefully guide them to reflect on their own writing ability and to view the assignment as something worthy of being proud of, not just something to complete for a grade. I also wanted to refrain from defining a specific length minimum or requirement to keep the project unstructured and allow the students to do as they best saw fit. A few students asked if they could use this project to begin a longer project (e.g. Starting to write a book) even if they would not finish within the two weeks, and they were highly encouraged to do so if that was the idea they were excited about.

Throughout the writing process, the classroom was full of movement and talking. Students frequently were up out of their seats to ask a peer for an idea or suggestion, or to show a piece of their writing, even before I encouraged peer editing. Students gravitated towards sharing their work and ideas with peers who are their friends, but also found peers that were working on a similar type of projects to discuss ideas.

One-on-one conferences between students and myself throughout the process were also highly beneficial. For the initial conference, students brought a proposal for their project and one goal for their own writing. Some of these goals were specific skills, such as using more descriptive language, or developing strong characters and dialogue, while others focused on more general goals, such as writing a funny story, reaching a certain goal of pages, or being more creative in their writing.

With the intentional open-endedness of this project, students chose to create a wide variety of products. Many chose to do a research paper of some sort, with the topics ranging anywhere from sports, such as the history of golf, all about gymnastics, or a biography on certain basketball players, to other topics that interested them such as tractors or monkeys. Other students chose to create chapters of fantasy novels or short stories with their own

imagined worlds full of magic, conflict, and fantastical creatures. Other genres students chose to write included mystery, historical fiction, survival stories, and realistic fiction. One student even wrote a script for a movie. With no requirements for length minimum or maximum, the length of student writing varied greatly as well, ranging anywhere from two to twenty-three pages. It is notable that the majority of students chose to type their project, but several preferred to hand write their final product as well.

Reflections

Student surveys were analyzed first by focusing on how they wrote about two main areas: How they reacted to writing with less structure and more choice, as well as how they reacted to working with peers. For both of these areas, the student response was recorded as a positive response, negative response, or neutral response/ no mention of the topic.

For working with less structure and more choice, 78% of student reflections had a positive response, while 13% had a neutral response or no mention of this topic. The positive responses frequently mentioned enjoying being able to write about whatever they wanted to and not feeling the pressure of a certain rubric, form, or length requirement. One student wrote that “without a strict structure helped me think outside of the box and come up with ideas on my own. It also made me want to do it more because it’s something I wanted to write about.” Another student reflected that “not having to hit a certain amount of pages really helps me write a lot more.” These show that a majority of students enjoyed the choice and freedom of the project, and many even wrote lengthy assignments without guidelines of how much to write. A third student focused in their reflection on how they felt, writing, “it makes me feel less stressed when I am not under pressure or strict structure.” Many other students wrote similar sentiments, highlighting that the project was fun, enjoyable, and for several they mentioned that it made them want to write more.

A few students highlighted the initial struggles or uneasiness with the openness of the assignment. This was something we discussed frequently in class, that it is okay to not know

what you want to write about right away, but the freedom can still be uncomfortable for many. Many students mentioned this initial struggle, but then figuring it out, such as one who wrote, “At first it was hard to come up with an idea, but once I got going and could write about what I wanted it was fun.” Another student wrote, “The loose structure was hard for me to figure out how long I should write. But not what to write about.” For many, this writing assignment was the most freedom and choice they had encountered in the classroom in a long time, and while many ran with it, it was also unsettling for many. The few negative reflections on choice focused on the difficulty of choosing what to write about.

The second area the reflections were analyzed for was how students responded to working and editing with peers. 50% of student reflections had a positive response to working with their peers, while 23% had a negative response. The remaining 27% either did not mention what they thought of working with peers, or had a neutral response.

For positive responses, the students commonly mentioned enjoying working with peers or finding it beneficial because of the ideas they received from peers. Several also mentioned that it was helpful “because I could see my story from all different perspectives and things that made sense in my mind but not others.” For students who had a negative response to working with peers, they most commonly wrote about not wanting to use suggestions from peers, or preferring to self edit or work by themselves. However, half of students still reported a positive experience working on their projects with their classmates.

Student Reflection Found Poem:

In order to better include my students’ voices in this research, I compiled quotes directly from student reflections into the following poem to illustrate the positive responses students had to this project.

I usually don’t like writing because I was forced to do it, but I liked this more.

I felt happy
Letting imagination run wild
It was fun writing about what I want to write about.

It showed me how much I like writing
Helped me think outside the box
Challenged me to think harder
It showed me how to write confidently
I became a better writer.

I could be as creative as I wanted to be.
I had more wiggle room
I didn't have to do something super exact.
We weren't supposed to do anything that we didn't want to do.

I am proud that I learned some new things and got to express my opinion
I surprised myself with how much I wrote
The way I write things made me very proud of myself!

This might change the way I feel that I'm not good at writing
Making me want to write more
and now I am writing a bunch of different stories.
Makes me realize I have writing as a hobby.

I made the best story I have ever made in this assignment
I hope we do another project like this again!

Student Highlights

While many students had impactful moments and outcomes throughout this project, I have selected three students below to show how this project played out in a variety of ways. Each student created vastly different projects and had different personal takeaways.

Elaine* is a student who declared she did not like writing at the start of this project. On her initial survey, she marked 'disagree' for the statement "I think I am a good writer" and 'strongly disagree' for "I enjoy writing." Elaine is a student who generally cares to do well on her school work but has never seen herself as a writer, only writing the bare minimum of what is required for her in class. For this project, Elaine was unsure of what she wanted to write about and struggled initially to choose an idea. Eventually, from discussion with her classmates about books she enjoys reading, Elaine chose to write a historical fiction short story, told through a series of letters. She ended up writing 13 pages of her story, and told me that she planned to continue writing the story on her own. Elaine has always been an adequate writer, but this project allowed her to create deep and meaningful characters and display a powerful writing voice that I had never been able to see in her previous writing. Not only that, but on the post survey, Elaine's answers about her writing ability and enjoyment of writing had both moved to 'undecided'. While it would have been ideal to see these answers move all the way to 'agree' or 'strongly agree', the growth from strongly disagree to undecided shows that Elaine is rethinking her perspective on writing and herself as a writer, because of what she accomplished and experienced through this project.

Jake is a seventh grader who always asks exactly how long a writing assignment needs to be. Whether it is a brief short answer about a text we read in class or an essay, he wants to know the exact shortest length he can write in order to still get a good grade. Usually, I do not give a specific length for writing assignments, but Jake still tries to get an answer. Jake is a bright and high achieving student that does well in school, but frequently complains any time we

have to write or be creative. On his initial survey, he marked 'strongly disagree' for the statement, "I think I am a good writer." I was anxious to see what he would do on this project. To my surprise, Jake immediately had an idea for his project and ran with it. He chose to write a paper on the history of golf, outlining differences through the years and key moments and players. His final project was just over 10 pages, which was more than I have ever seen him write. He was very eager to share his project with me and any classmates that would read it. On his final survey, he also changed his answer on being a good writer to 'agree'. Both Elaine and Jake show that choice and unstructured writing can allow students to engage in an enjoyment of writing in ways that they haven't before, and can improve their perception of themselves as writers.

Ethan is a student who struggles with school and writing. At the start of this project, he did not know what he wanted to create, but eventually decided to research and write about monkeys. While his final product was not as lengthy as other students at two pages, he was very proud of what he created and called me over often to share a new fact he had learned about monkeys. In his reflection, Ethan wrote "I feel this project went well. I chose to write about monkeys and apes. I think working without restrictions was pretty nice because I didn't have any limits on what to do ... What im proud of the most is the amount that I learned about monkeys and apes when writing it." On both the pre and post survey, Ethan marked "agree" with the statement, "I think I am a good writer." However, his answer for the statement, "I enjoy writing" changed from "disagree" to "agree". Ethan's experience shows that the opportunity to write and learn about a topic of his choice was both motivating and rewarding. Even though writing often presents a challenge for him, he enjoyed the project and was proud of what he learned.

Limitations

Although this study showed positive results in many areas, there are a few recognized limitations of this study as well. First, this study was conducted over a period of two and a half weeks. While looking at growth in how students perceive themselves as writers, as well as what

motivates them to write, this is a short period of time to see significant growth. There were many data points to suggest that choice and unstructured writing can benefit student writers, but I would recommend studying the impacts of these elements over a longer period of time in order to see more significant impacts.

A second potential limitation of this study is the sample size. Ideally, this study could be implemented on a larger scale across different school contexts to analyze the full impacts of choice and unstructured writing time. Along with sample size, this was my second year teaching these students, and this study took place close to the end of the year. I am passionate about including student choice and creativity into the classroom, and frequently try to communicate to my students that they are capable writers and the importance of writing. Therefore, these students have already been exposed to choice and creativity in the language arts classroom, and it would be interesting to see how the results of this study would differ if implemented with students who are unfamiliar with choice and my teaching. That being said, this project did expose students to choice and unstructured writing on a much larger scale than they had previously seen, and they showed growth in how they view themselves as writers.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of student motivation and ownership of their writing through providing choice and unstructured writing opportunities. The data of this study shows that students responded positively to working with more choice and freedom in their writing, as 78% of writers included a positive mention of this in their reflection. This response alone is a compelling reason for adding more choice and freedom into classroom practices, particularly writing opportunities. The found poem also highlights the positive responses students had through this project, explaining that the project was fun and enjoyable, but also challenged them in their writing and how they think about writing. Seeing students reflect that they wanted to write more in the future or that they surprised themselves in their

writing, either with the length of what they produced or with their enjoyment of the project, was a very encouraging outcome. I was particularly struck by the student who wrote “We weren’t supposed to do anything that we didn’t want to do.” While this was not directly stated during the instruction of the project, this quote summarizes the goals of the project well; that students would pursue a project and a topic that interests them and run with it.

The variety of projects the students chose to create and the length of these assignments also speaks highly to the benefits of allowing student choice and time for unstructured writing projects in the classroom. While some of the genres were writing we had done in class before, such as research papers on a topic of their choice or fictional short stories, there were many avenues students chose that I had never included in the classroom, such as movie scripts, historical fiction stories, and horror stories. It is unreasonable to ask teachers to cover every style and genre of writing in one school year, so providing a choice where students can select one that interests them is a strong way to expose students to a variety of writing and an opportunity to enjoy writing.

The student reflections also revealed that only 50% of students mentioned a positive experience from working with peers. This 50% is not an overwhelming majority, but 27% of students either did not mention working with peers or had a neutral response. However, in both the “Social Feedback” and the “Physiological States” questions from the survey, the class average improved on every question from the initial survey to the post survey (See Table 2 and Table 3). Social Feedback questions focused on how students think others perceive them as a writer, such as their classmates, teacher, or family, while Physiological States focused on how writing makes the students feel. The overall growth in both of these areas suggests that this project helped to establish a positive community of writers and helped students to have a more positive view of writing. Even if students did not express a positive response in their reflection towards working with peers, their surveys reflected minimal negative response. In the Social Feedback category, there were 119 possible answers (17 students with 7 questions each). Of

these 117 answers, only 8 had negative change, with 45 showing positive change, and the rest remaining neutral. This shows that although not a significant majority of students enjoyed working with peers or receiving feedback from peers, the majority of students still had a positive experience in their understanding of how others perceive them as writers.

From the surveys, I was surprised by the large positive growth in how the students responded to the statements “My teacher thinks I’m a good writer” and “My teacher thinks my writing is fine.” Of the survey questions, these two statements saw the second and fourth most growth overall (see questions number 17 and 19 in Table 2), which leads me to question the practices that led to this area of growth. I believe that the most compelling explanation for these findings are due largely to the amount of feedback I provided on student writing throughout the writing process. I always try to provide feedback for students on their writing, but it most often comes at the end of their writing time on a final draft, or on a specific section of their draft that students have selected. For this project, I was intentional to provide detailed feedback on every student’s entire rough draft while still focusing on areas they asked for specific feedback. I provided suggestions to make their writing stronger and comments of what I thought was going well so far in their writing. Each student also had at least two one-on-one conferences with me; one during the initial brainstorming phase and one after they received my feedback on their rough draft. I believe that engaging in these practices of feedback and conferences at a personal level for each student are what led students to grow in their belief that I see them as good writers.

Conclusion

When presented with creative and unstructured writing opportunities, students are more likely to engage deeply with their writing and to perceive themselves positively as writers. This engagement can be seen either through the length of projects students created without structure, their excitement and attitude about their topic, or even in how they reflected proudly on what they wrote. When students are given the space to pursue an avenue that interests

them, they will have space to explore writing in a meaningful and accessible way. This engagement with creative and unstructured writing also impacts student writing self perception. As students had positive experiences with writing, they were more willing to share what they wrote and show an increase in their belief of the statement, “I am a good writer.”

This study also aimed to analyze how peer and teacher feedback impacted a classroom writing community, and found that intentional teacher feedback can have a large impact on how students see themselves as writers. Students showed consistent growth in their understanding of the positive light in which I viewed their writing. Even within a classroom where I try to be intentional in communicating that all students are capable writers and give positive feedback on writing, the unique depth of feedback on the projects in the midst of the writing process paired with one-on-one conferences impacted how students believed I perceived their writing. This study also showed the benefits of students working with their peers to gain new ideas and discuss their writing. As students became more comfortable discussing their writing, the students began to view their peers as writers and people worth asking advice and input from.

While this study took place at the seventh grade level, I believe these findings can extend to writers of all grade levels. This is because writing is an essential skill for students across all grade levels and providing them with a positive writing experience can impact how they approach all future writing.

Implications for Teachers

In the classroom, students need ample time for choice and unstructured writing opportunities. These elements will allow students positive writing experiences that give them a reason to invest in their writing. Choice also allows students to develop their own autonomy and voice as they make decisions in their writing. If students only write in the classroom in prescriptive ways and view writing as only a task to accomplish for a grade, they are missing the depth and richness that writing can provide, and also missing the opportunity to develop their

creativity, sense of identity, and communication skills that are all important building blocks for success beyond the classroom.

Writing time in the classroom also needs to have social and collaborative opportunities. While in this study students each were creating their own project, they were frequently up out of their seats to share a piece of their writing with a classmate, ask for feedback, or see what a classmate was writing. To an outsider looking in this may appear to be a chaotic classroom practice, but it allows students to see themselves as a community of writers, become more comfortable sharing their writing, and receive feedback from their peers. It is essential that teachers allow writing to be a collaborative time. This means that students know what their peers are working on and they have the ability to converse with peers during this time. Allowing students this freedom may feel challenging at first, but it is worth it to build a classroom community of writers.

Students also benefit from feedback from their teacher throughout the writing process, not just feedback on their finished piece. Time taken from the teacher to give meaningful feedback on student writing helps communicate to the students that their writing is valued and helps them to see themselves as writers. It also helps students to view writing as a continual ongoing process, rather than just one product they create for a grade. Throughout this project, I was continually using class time to check in with students and their writing process, offering to read pieces or help with ideas. When students turned in a rough draft around day 8, I took the time to read each piece and leave comments throughout their writing. These comments did not focus on small mechanical or grammatical errors, but rather asked questions about their writing, provided suggestions for where they could go, and encouraged them in pieces of their writing that were strong. Although giving meaningful feedback can be time consuming, it helps create a stronger writing community as well. While it is not feasible to give detailed teacher feedback on every piece of student writing, it is a practice that needs to be integrated when possible in order

for students to see the value of editing and revising, and for students to see the value the teacher sees in their writing.

The ideas of giving students more time to write and more freedom in their writing are not new, but they can feel difficult to justify when there are many other pressures such as preparing students for standardized tests and fitting in required curriculums. However, this study shows that even a shorter time frame such as two weeks dedicated to writing can have positive long term impacts on student writing and student self perception. It is known that choice can help engage students, but this study shows how through choice and unstructured writing opportunities students can exceed even their own expectations of what they thought possible. This study also emphasizes this success at a middle school level; choice is not something students need to earn as they get older. Rather, choice and unstructured writing opportunities allow students to grow in their autonomy and writing development. Students need the opportunity to make decisions in their writing, explore their own identity and interests, and have positive writing experiences. When students see writing as something that is approachable, enjoyable, and personal, they can become more confident in who they are as a writer and be better prepared for success both in the classroom and in the world beyond.

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Appendix A

Student Facing Instructions

Writing Passion Project

For this project, you will create a polished piece of writing in the format of your choice over the next 2-3 weeks. This is an opportunity for you to create something that you want to write. We will be working with peer workshops to help plan, revise, and polish our projects.

Project ideas:

- Short story (real or imagined, fantasy or mystery, or another genre)
- Series of poems
- Play or movie script
- Podcast script
- Letters
- Persuasive or argumentative paper
- Research a topic you are interested in and explain it
- Or any other option you can think of!

Proposal:

Answer the following questions, and turn in to be approved by Mrs. Brown.

1. Chosen form/ genre:

2. Summary of your piece: (3-6 sentences):

3. One personal writing goal for this project:

You will be graded on the following:

- Purpose, ideas, and creativity
- Organization
- Revision
- Reflection

Appendix B

Student Survey

Writing Self Perception Scale:

Created by Diane Bottomley, William A. Henk, and Steven A. Melnick (1997)

General Progress

Social Feedback

Physiological States

Listed below are statements about writing. Please read each statement carefully. Then circle the letters that show how much you agree or disagree with the statement. Use the following scale:

SA = Strongly Agree

A = Agree

U = Undecided

D = Disagree

SD = Strongly Disagree

Example: I think Batman is the greatest super hero. SA A U D SD

If you are *really positive* that Batman is the greatest, circle SA (Strongly Agree).

If you *think* that Batman is good but maybe not great, circle A (Agree).

If you *can't decide* whether or not Batman is the greatest, circle U (Undecided).

If you *think* that Batman is not all that great, circle D (Disagree).

If you are *really positive* that Batman is not the greatest, circle SD (Strongly Disagree).

(GPR) 1. Writing is easier for me than it used to be. SA A U D SD

(SF) 2. People in my family think I am a good writer. SA A U D SD

(GPR) 3. I am getting better at writing. SA A U D SD

(PS) 4. When I write, I feel calm. SA A U D SD

(SF) 5. My teacher thinks my writing is fine. SA A U D SD

(SF) 6. Other kids think I am a good writer. SA A U D SD

(GPR) 7. I need less help to write well than I used to.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF) 8. People in my family think I write pretty well.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(GPR) 9. I write better now than I could before.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(GEN) 10. I think I am a good writer.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(GPR) 11. My writing has improved.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(GPR) 12. My writing is better than before.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(GPR) 13. It's easier to write well now than it used to be.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(GPR) 14. The organization of my writing has really improved.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS) 15. I am relaxed when I write.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS) 16. I feel comfortable when I write.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF) 17. My teacher thinks I am a good writer.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS) 18. Writing makes me feel good.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF) 19. I can tell that my teacher thinks my writing is fine.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS) 20. I enjoy writing.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF) 21. My classmates would say I write well.	SA	A	U	D	SD